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INFO RUEHDS/AMEMBASSY ADDIS ABABA 0273
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SUBJECT: REFUGEE FLOWS INTO YEMEN STRAIN AN ALREADY BURDENED SYSTEM

¶11. (SBU/NF) SUMMARY: Pressing on an already overburdened system, the number of refugees in Yemen continued to increase in 2008. The ROYG is beginning to feel the increasing pressure from the existing population of refugees, along with these new arrivals, as evidenced by a draft law to end the policy of automatically granting refugee status to Somalis. The draft law circulated among the ROYG, but failed to gain traction. END SUMMARY.

¶12. (SBU/NF) 2008 saw a 70% increase in the number of migrant arrivals on the southern and western coasts of Yemen since 2007. According to UNHCR statistics, there were 50,091 new arrivals in 2008. This is a significant increase over the 2007 figure of 29,360.

Among these new arrivals, there was a sharp increase in the number of Somalis, from 17,785 in 2007 to 33,019 in 2008, an increase of more than 85%. Over the same period, non-Somali arrivals increased by almost 50%, from 11,575 to 17,072.

¶13. (SBU/NF) The two main causes of the increase are continued instability in the Horn of Africa, especially Somalia, and migrants seeking economic opportunity. UNHCR interviews migrants when they arrive at UNHCR reception centers near the coast and compiles the interviews into monthly reports. Most migrants cite lack of security due to the on-going civil war in Somalia and lack of economic opportunity as their main reasons for making the trip. Many report they hope to use Yemen as a gateway into other Gulf and Middle Eastern countries in search of jobs and economic opportunity.

¶14. (SBU/NF) At the end of 2008, there were 140,308 recognized refugees in Yemen. Of those, 133,080 were Somalis, 4,594 were Iraqis, and the rest included small numbers of Ethiopians, Palestinians, and Eritreans. (Note: Somalis are given automatic refugee status by the ROYG. End Note.) A majority of the refugees live in urban centers, especially Sanaa and Aden. In the Kharaz refugee camp, located west of Aden, the number of residents has remained relatively steady since 2003. At the end of 2008, there were 11,184 residents, of which 10,732 were Somali.

¶15. (SBU/NF) UNHCR estimates that at least 140,000 unregistered migrants live in Yemen. The vast majority of the unrecognized migrants are Ethiopians. Lacking any legal status in Yemen, these migrants are particularly vulnerable to exploitation. The ROYG is often unwilling to allow UNHCR complete status determinations for these migrants, who often avoid local and UNHCR authorities, and attempt to reach larger urban centers where there are work opportunities and communities to support them. The number of new Ethiopian arrivals processed in UNHCR reception centers increased from 21% in 2007 to 36% in 2008. UNHCR attributes the increase to

better outreach and resource allocation when meeting migrants arriving at the coast.

¶6. (SBU/NF) The increase in refugees burdens Yemen's economy by adding workers to an already tight labor market. This economic pressure led some in the ROYG to circulate a draft law ending the policy of automatically granting refugee status to Somalis. While this draft law failed to gain traction in the ROYG, UNHCR reports that there are factions within the ROYG that wish to reduce the burden of refugees in Yemen. (Note: Post has been unable to indentify the source of the draft law but continues to investigate. End Note.) UNHCR continues to encourage the ROYG to adopt a national refugee law under the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and the 1967 Protocol to which Yemen is a signatory. According to the UNHCR Representative in Yemen, Claire Bourgeois, the ROYG fears such a law will only increase the refugee flow. UNHCR also reported the ROYG often limits or delays UNHCR access to non-Somali migrants.

¶7. (SBU/NF) UNHCR aims to improve educational and economic opportunities, healthcare, and sanitation for refugees in the urban centers where current conditions are very difficult. An added benefit of these programs is that they would also improve conditions for the local population, helping to entice the ROYG cooperation. Monitoring and reporting on these programs in urban centers is more viable given the current security situation in Yemen, which limits in country travel for many foreigners.

¶8. COMMENT: (SBU/NF) In the unlikely event that the ROYG enacts legislation guaranteeing refugee rights under the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and the 1967 Protocol, the automatic granting of refugee status to Somalis will end because the Convention and Protocol state refugee status determinations must normally be determined on an individual basis. (Note: Group determinations can be made in cases of extreme urgency but this does not apply in the current situation with Somalis. End Note.) A comprehensive refugee law would also help with UNHCR's inconsistent access to non-Somali migrants to make refugee status determinations.

The prospects for such a law, though, seem unlikely at this time.
END COMMENT.